

Cut employee purchasing cards, Montgomery County councilman says

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A Montgomery County lawmaker is calling for the county government to rein in the use of taxpayer-funded credit cards following a report that one department misused them.

The Office of Human Rights [made inappropriate purchases using the county's purchasing cards](#) between September 2008 and September 2010, county Inspector General Edward Blansitt found in an audit released last month.

The spending included gifts between county employees, flowers for employees' personal use, food for meetings and clothing for the office's summer camp program. Of the total \$72,487, \$29,310 -- or 40 percent -- was questionable.

Since the audit was released, the Human Rights Office got rid of all of its purchasing cards except one, department Director James Stowe told a county council committee Thursday. That card has a \$500 limit and is used primarily for "emergencies" and for buying office supplies, he said.

[Councilman Craig Rice](#), D-Germantown, said the county should get rid of most, if not all, purchasing cards and require employees to instead seek reimbursement after making a purchase.

"Every employer experiences employees who don't do the right thing," he said. "We saw it with [take-home] vehicle usage. There's no reason why it would be any different with purchase cards."

Though the department might be buying legitimate items like office supplies, "that doesn't mean that there's any guarantee that those things are actually going to the office," Rice added. "There need to be other things set in place to make sure that these purchases are approved and that they're a good use of taxpayers' money."

Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Fariba Kassiri, whose department oversees the administration of the cards, argued that they improve oversight by giving the county an electronic record of what was bought.

But purchasing cards need to be properly managed, Blansitt warned, and the administration of the cards often takes a backseat to other priorities. Cards can be easily misused if an employee has to review purchases made by a superior, he said.

For Department of General Services Director David Dise, the cards are a vital tool. He said he uses them extensively because it streamlines purchases for large projects, and getting rid of the cards would mean more contracts and more storage space for supplies bought in bulk.

Dise said he gets bulk rates for purchases made on cards, and vendors often give him discounts because the vendor gets paid immediately, rather than waiting for the county to pay later.

"Frankly, I don't think there's enough," he said. "I would put [purchasing] cards in the hands of every one of my field personnel."

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